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"It May Start Out as a Game But It Ends up a Whole World": Creepypasta, QAnon, and the Anomalous Tales of the Internet

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A large crowd gathers in Dallas to await JFK Jr.'s return from the dead (Magloire 2023). A contorted smile haunts children's YouTube recommended (Lewis 2019). An anonymous cultic organisation drops cryptic clues on flyers all around the world all at once (Leach 2013). Within the story of storytelling there would likely be a wealth of unruly and unreliable tales which trouble and transgress the boundaries of what most would consider common place reality. Running underneath the grand narratives of myth, closer to the contested territories of legends, this stranger strata would likely emerge nested and fragmented across cultures, epochs and forms; in fireside folk tales, unresolved witness statements, maritime rhymes and accompanying supposedly supernatural sightings. Even in the face of technological or secularising changes, these types of stories seem like a relative constant especially as they find new homes and greater virality on the internet. These stories, unable to be integrated into the systems of religious belief, scientific rationale, or other ordering theories of the cosmos, might be characterised as stories of that-which-does-not-fit, telling of events which radically break the rules.

Despite their unbelievable or even supernatural contents however, this category of legend-like story which I will call tales of the anomalous[1] often have some sticking power; some infectious allure which troubles the boundaries of belief and causes them to spread in spite of what rational minds might caution.

The Anomalous in Context

The term the anomalous emerges in many forms[2] and arrives in different guises, three examples of which I would like to briefly

discuss so as to better contextualise this idea as I relate it to narrative going forward.

A commonplace definition might conjure associations of statistic or scientific anomalies, with recordings of abnormal phenomena which must be discarded lest they disrupt the expected model. The great chronicler of these was Charles Fort, whose *The Book of the Damned* exhaustively collected data he claimed, "science has excluded" (Fort 1919, 7). Combing through newspapers and witness statements, Fort collected reports of strange lights in the sky, "falls" of "black rain" and "thunderstones", producing "a procession of the damned" (228, 22, 98, 7). It seems likely however that Fort's aim was not to mount a case for the paranormal, claiming "I believe nothing of my own that I have ever written" (Lippard 1996, 277–80), but instead as an exercise in plurality in the face of what he saw as a prevailing societal dogmatism. Resultantly I believe Fort's text should be taken as an exercise in attention to firsthand collective experiences. As pointed out by Professor Chris French, head of the University of London's Anomalistic Psychology Research Unit, the relative frequency of belief in strange and paranormal events should tell us "something really interesting about human psychology" (French 2010) and how belief is constructed, and so ought to be taken seriously. Rejecting a belief as ridiculously out of hand is rarely an effective way of preventing its spread. For example, Fort's own disavowal of such anomalistic phenomena didn't stop the sincere pseudoscientific field of "anomalistics" developing from his writing; a field which claims to scientifically investigate psychic phenomena, cryptozoology, UFOs and "all phenomena that fail to fit the picture of reality" (Wescott 1975). From this, two lessons might be learnt about the nature of anomalous narratives; that we should pay some consideration to what becomes of collective anomalous beliefs, or perhaps more importantly, what becomes of them when they are rejected and left to ferment on the fringes. Following this, the second lesson concerns how these strange tales have a habit of transmuting themselves. Very often the sensitivity and scepticism with which one community handles these stories is lost as they are told and retold, precipitating import changes to the story's nature as they are passing on, as seen when discussed in examples later. To this end, despite how aberrant or fantastic anomalous reports might be in actuality, the anomalous often arrives from unexpected directions and dressed in the clothing of factuality, aided in their travels via people's subjective intrigues and desire for that-which-does- not-fit.

Changing registers, Justin Barton discusses the powers of the anomalous in fictional form in his theory memoir hybrid *Hidden Valleys*. Barton describes how it was Romanticism which, through resurrecting Shakespeare's fantastic narratives, opened up a space for "the possibility of *thinking by means of writing anomalous tales"* (Barton 2012, 2) once again. Barton characterises these anomalous tales as exhibiting an oneiric quality twinned with a "focused lucidity in the face of the unknown" (159). Through this attention to the unknown, the anomalous tale derives a power beyond the thought "blocking-system of reason-revelation" (153), a power beyond the "forces of the ordinary world" (2). Barton ties this oneiric mode of thought to a forgotten but essential tract within the development of modernism and its ability to dream a future outside the known through those imaginative acts of focused lucidity. He traces a lineage through Christina Rossetti's *Goblin Market*, Lewis Carroll's *Alice in Wonderland* and to *Thus Spoke Zarathustra,* by which time "modernism had gone into full effect" (159). Certainty not all tales of the anomalous reach these modernist heights, and the biographical biases behind Barton's thinking should not be ignored, locating as he does this lost oneiric potential in Pattie Smith's *Horses*, *Picnic at Hanging Rock* and the media and culture of his youth. However, under the right circumstances and through the same sensitivity with which Fort handled his strange stories, might the telling of anomalous tales tap into that oneiric mode of thought through which thinking progresses beyond the known? Carrying on I would like to keep in mind this association of tales of the anomalous with that mode of dreamlike insight which seems to work beyond the rational.

The nature of the anomalous' association with outsider thinking is further refined by Gilles Deleuze and Félix Guattari, who trace back the word's etymology in their chapter on becoming in *A Thousand Plateaus*. They find that, differentiated from the abnormal, the Greek origins of the anomalous pertained to "the unequal, the coarse, the rough, the cutting edge of deterritorialization" (Deleuze and Guattari [1988] 2013, 284). Following this, Deleuze and Guattari define the anomalous not in terms of characteristics alone but chiefly as a phenomenon; a "phenomenon of bordering" (286). The anomalous is neither only "an individual nor species, it has only affects" (285). Resultantly the anomalous can be read as that which runs against the grain, that outlier element which does not fit and so changes the make up of the whole as it is absorbed through, as Deleuze and Guattari describe, contagion, pacts and "monstrous alliance[s]" (284). Deleuze and Guattari's writing after the fallout of

the May 1968 Paris student protests becomes a project of what they call "schizoanalysis" (292), a strategy for combatting how capitalism and the state makes one desire one's own oppression; capitalism and the state's Oedipalising methods of social control. From this reading, the anomalous becomes a way of shedding immured pathological social and economic relations, with the anomalous acting as another vector for becoming, and a route towards new and productive transformations. With this in mind, I would suggest that these might always be productive transformations, breaking down the boundaries between two states and remaking them a new, but not necessarily progressive ones. The dream and the nightmare derive from the same night-time operations. The anomalous itself has no stake in the outcome of encountering it, "it has only affects" (285).

From these three formations, three key qualities might be extracted to produce a nascent theory of the anomalous tale. Firstly, that the anomalous story has a strange and twisting relationship to factuality and belief, due to which often warrants a certain sensitivity and caution when encountered. Secondly, that they relate in some way to oneiric insights beyond the limits of rationality or the everyday, but that these also come with their own dangers. The third and perhaps the most significant quality, since it allows the category of tales of the anomalous to be conceived as a collection of narratives diverse in characteristics but sharing in a common operation; that they affect the cutting across of borders, that sharp edge which pierces the boundary, alters our subjectivities, resists control and leads to infectious transformations and strange new alliances born out of the ensuing rupture.

Contemporary Tales of the Anomalous

As the digital glow of the screen replaces the flickering flame of the campsite as the light by which these anomalous stories are told, what else is changed as these stories find new homes on the internet? I will explore how strange stories are told online, using these theories of the anomalous as a lens to analyse how they behave, and what these stories tell us about our networked age in return. I will focus on two examples to explore the anomalous within a digital ecosystem, the genre of creepypasta and the QAnon conspiracy theory.

Both phenomena, even when being selective, contain labyrinthine decentralised narratives to grapple with. My focus will not be on telling these stories in their entirety[3], but instead focussing on the narrative mechanics and the affordances they gain from the internet platforms they are told across, how their inherently online

nature shapes their respective communities' engage with the movements, and the consequences of encountering these anomalous stories. Similarly, I have chosen to focus more broadly on creepypasta and QAnon as a whole instead of using single emblematic examples, considering these trends as a complex matrix of stories and storytellers, and which can be seen as extending traditional folkloric or legend-like modes of storytelling and experiencing into the digital sphere. I hope to develop this theory of anomalous stories in relation to these two examples, with both the emergent theory and the understanding of creepypasta and QAnon developing concomitantly. I believe this approach will show how in understanding these niche but popular online communities, something might be understood about how seemingly unbelievable narratives work online more generally, and how online narratives come to effect offline realities. I shall be attempting to support my hunch that to some degree, at its core, the internet is a machine for creating, amplifying and spreading tales of the anomalous and contemporary legends, and that through considering the anomalistic stories which haunt the fringes of culture and society we might actually open up a privileged view of what was at the centre all along, just as earlier legends betrayed the hopes, desires, anxieties and vulnerabilities of the societies which told them.

Tales of the Anomalous: Introducing creepypasta

A nighttime view from a family home's window rendered ominous by the low-resolution camera's flattening of forms and its furtive glances out towards whatever might be hiding in the low bit-depth darkness. "A clip which doesn't fit with the others" (Wagner 2009), reads simple white text on a black background; one of many reportedly rediscovered and unexplained excerpts captured during an abandoned student film project.

Glimpses of what could be a figure seem to cause glitched refractions as if in the presence of some disruptive entity. To watch these videos, to comb across this collection of 134 unedited excerpts and scraps, pausing frames to look harder and peer into the corrupted and obscured details, allows one into the sensation of being witness to something genuinely strange having been captured and uploaded to the internet for us to witness; to be part of a select audience who have stumbled across artefacts of a unique anomalous encounter. Often bleakly beautiful in their under exposed soft renderings of suburban woodlands and domestic interiors, cheesy on occasion in their amateur acting, generally eerie and usually

admirable in their experimental playfulness, these clips make up the core of *Marble Hornets.* A web series and ARG (Alternate Reality Game), *Marble Hornets* was made by Troy Wagner and friends between 2009 and 2014, and made elaborate use of different YouTube accounts, Twitter profiles and the affordances granted by these platforms to tell its story in sometimes complex and savvy ways. Primarily it is one of many key contributions in the telling and developing of the story of Slenderman (sometimes presented as Slender Man too), a preternaturally tall, sometimes tentacled white bogeyman in a black suit, the most popular figure and poster ghoul for the online community known as creepypasta.

The horror variant of copypasta, a mode of short shareable online fiction named after the copy and paste function by which it spreads, the term creepypasta originated on the 4chan /x/ board around 2007 according to Line Henriksen (2019). Emerging at a time on the internet very different to now and, as Dr Vivian Asimos points out, when exclusively online communities were treated with suspicion (2021a), creepypasta's origins can be traced to things like early memes, the fear inducing chain-mail of the 90's and internet urban legends and legend-like narratives such as the haunted arcade game Polybius. Generally eschewing the conventional figures and beasts of horror, instead reworking them into new formulations, the genre eventually formed around message boards such as Something Awful and 4chan, the No Sleep (r/nosleep) subreddit, and YouTube. Creepypasta can exist as text, video, memes and images, or as often in its most successful and far-reaching instances, some combination of multiple forms generated by multiple users committed to telling and retelling these stories via the affordances and possibilities for storytelling and experiencing granted by these online platforms. Resultantly, the best creepypasta often exhibits a discerning medium specificity, producing as Will Wiles writes "a sense of the internet starting to talk about itself" (n.d.), as these digital horror stories discover new ways to develop and deploy their narratives in ways unique to their networked nature. As most within the community will attest to, the genre had its heyday between 2009 and 2014, with the media panic around Slenderman (discussed later) and the key demographic ageing out of the trend being factors for its decline (Reddit 2020). Despite this, it still comprises of a considerable community today, with No Sleep still sitting within the top 50 Reddit boards as of March 2025, and with new evolutions on TikTok like the popular backrooms' videos achieving views in the billions (TikTok n.d.). The following considers and asks questions of four

interrelated aspects of creepypasta in terms of the anomalous, before looking to how these re-manifest in both different and related ways in QAnon's narrative mechanics, hoping to find answers as one throws relief upon the other.

"Smile Dog" and the Anomalous as Supernatural

In the plainest sense creepypasta immediately qualify as tales of the anomalous with their expository narratives, or lack-there-of, explicitly relying upon allusions to paranormal forces breaking into the everyday. This trend is seen in emblematic examples like the cursed image file, a JPEG, at the centre of Smile Dog, a story originating on the 4chan /x/ board according to creepypasta.com. In this canonical recounting, the narrator describes investigating the internet legend of "smile.jpg", supposedly a polaroid image of a husky with "very human-looking teeth," the viewing of which induces "sudden onset temporal lobe epilepsy and acute anxiety" accompanied by the image of Smile Dog "endlessly repeated in their mind's eye" along with the command to "spread the word" in order to be relieved of the torment. At the end of the text, the narrator ends by admitting that they had in fact discovered the cursed image, and that after weighing up whether they would in fact "spread the word" (Creepypasta n.d.) and save themselves, encloses the very image at the bottom of the article, spreading the word and cursing the reader (that is, if it is in fact the real image, and not one of many fake imitators; the narrative's clever excuse which allows the existence of the *real* .jpg to remain at large somewhere else). Centred around the superstitious logic of the chain letter, clearly narratives like Smile Dog speak very directly to anomalous phenomena, in telling of impossible interactions with digital objects reminiscent of earlier stories of haunted and haunting visages, from *Dorian Grey* (Wilde 1890) to *Videodrome* (Cronenberg 1984).

Through examples like this, as misinformation researcher Joe Ondrak (2018) defines, creepypasta can be seen as "characterised by unsettling paranormal" content or events that "haunt the Internet" as earlier scary tales of the unexplained haunted late night film screenings and campfires on a dark night.

Whilst Smile Dog's narrative conforms to that quality of the anomalous through its spurious reporting of supernatural encounters, this acknowledgement speaks only to the simplest and least interesting way creepypasta fulfils the category, as anomalous content. The appeal or communicative power of the content of creepypasta's anomalous supernatural stories could be analysed from

multiple perspectives and is done successfully by many of the authors used in the following discussion. One could also look to Julia Kristeva's Lacanian discussion of abjection as a useful lens to understanding the horrific content of creepypasta, positioning the abject as she does in terms of that which "does not respect borders, positions [or] rules" as "the in-between, the ambiguous" (Kristeva 1982), language concurrent with of my own Deleuzoguattarian situating of the anomalous. These insights, however, would likely be true of many stories featuring such characteristics, and so instead I want to look towards what is new in creepypasta; its inherently online nature, its affects and not just its characteristics, and how it is received within its networked community. With this in mind, it is Smile Dog's narrative of propagation through curse which points in the next direction of travel; towards creepypasta's unique power to spread the word.

Accelerated Folklore and Viral Production

Central to most academic study of creepypasta is how, as Shira Chess terms it, creepypasta's "open- sourcing" (2012, 374-393) of traditional modes of storytelling extend the possibilities of forms like the urban legend through the operations, speed and reach opened by the inherently interconnected nature of the internet. Andrew Peck's summary of the creation of Slenderman offers a useful example of this. Beginning with Victor Surge's "pair of photoshops and a half-dozen lines of text" on somethingawful.com in 2009, users quickly:

> told stories, shared images, and theorized as to the nature of the nascent Lovecraftian horror. Each [contribution] added to and subtracted from how the entity was imagined by the group. Users critiqued these performances, discussing what elements made them most effective (Peck 2015, 16).

Through this process of critiquing, tweaking and refining these narratives are communally developed for maximum impact. Peck is among a group of folklorists who view this communal creation as functioning like the production of a digital folklore, one in which "users collaborated in an ongoing process" to produce an entire "Slender Man legend cycle" (Peck 2015, 16), a process accelerated by and entirely original to the web. Through example such as this, creepypasta demonstrates how the internet adapts and expands millennia old modes of telling strange tales and legends, extending their participatory and communally authored nature through the immediacy and reach of contemporary digital communication.

I believe, however, that this folkloric model of understanding creepypasta underplays an important aspect which may have broader implications for understanding why certain narratives rise to prominence and gain such traction online. Within this collaborative but also *competitive* model, the stories which do rise to the top of the thread emerge as particularly effective and virulent objects, through something I have likened in previous writing to a "narrative Darwinism" (Speakman 2022, 8). Not only does digital media allow for a greater ease and fidelity of reproduction than in earlier oral legend transmission, but the ability for an audience to upvote, reshare and like creepypasta media on platforms like 4chan, Reddit and YouTube allows a community to quickly raise the most popular expressions and narrative developments of these new legend-like narratives to the status of canon through democratic and quantifiable means. Could these processes of competitive open-sourced refinement and distillation made possible by the engagement mechanics of these platforms be central to how some creepypasta seem to become such effectively infectious and alluring narratives? I shall return to this point later when, as I begin to considering how such putatively anomalous narratives come to exert such real world influences.

The Anomalous as a Phenomenon of Bordering

Creepypasta makes even further use of its networked nature, as it hijacks different mediums and platforms to tell and spread its stories, utilising the porous and amorphous textual boundaries of Web2.0 internet platforms. As media theorist Jessica Balanzategui describes, the best creepypasta has always exhibited a self reflectivity and "multimodal" way of telling stories in "aesthetically complex ways" (Balanzategui 2019, 188). For example *Marble Hornets* takes what Henry Jenkins (2006) , telling its stories across different accounts on different everyday platforms, insinuating its narrative and characters into the everyday fabric of the internet. As Vivian Asimos describes, "[Twitter] exchanges made outside of the YouTube context remained within character…" and a "gap in video uploads" correspond to a "gap in time in the story" (Asimos 2021b). This extends to the point where characters sometimes even refer to the YouTube channel the viewer is watching videos on, as an everyday non-fictional YouTuber would do, meaning the story is told from different perspectives and across multiple platforms so as to give the impression of the narrative's organic legend-like emergence rather than its actual carefully and singularly authored nature. What this means is that the

anomalous narrative of *Marble Hornet*s emerges from the same information spaces one might go to keep up to date with current events or a friend's activities without the fiction announcing itself as a fiction; meaning the online sites, sources and platforms by which one goes to learn the facts of reality also becomes the space for anomalous and unbelievable encounters to play out. Ondrak describes this process as one of the ways creepypasta exploits so as to reveal the fact that social platforms and blogs "rely on what's essentially an implicit social contract", that what we encounter (Ondrak 2021, 8:29) Through this creepypasta shows how the internet's inherently interconnected nature produces the opportunity for anomalous narratives to cut across contexts and borders, and the troubling epistemological fog which arises from this as they confuse and infect information sources.

One effect of this is to produce "monstrous alliances" (Deleuze and Guattari [1988] 2013, 284) between the real and imagined, extending the legend form's complex oscillation between fact and fiction into the digital realm through exploiting the customs and assumptions with which users approach social media platforms. As many have pointed out (Balanzategui 2019, Henriksen 2013) creepypasta takes part in a long tradition of horror, from *Castle of Otranto* (Walpole [1764] 1986) to *The Blair Witch Project* (Myric and Sánchez 1999) and beyond, which delivers its chills under the false auspices of the found document or earnest reportage. Henriksen terms this the "'authentic paranormal' – that is, fictive stories of the supernatural that play on the documentary-style aesthetics of the 'real'" (Henriksen 2013, 415). This is at play in the very genesis of Slenderman, through creator Victor Surge's photoshopped black and white images which are falsely read as authentically historical, accompanied by a short faux-factual byline as if having been filed by some local authority, details often re-reported as fact on creepypasta wikis (Slender Man Fandom n.d.). This drive towards the authentically paranormal is also found on No Sleep, the most popular subreddit for text based creepypasta, where the community guidelines state "everything is true here, even if it's not" (Reddit n.d.). This translates to a custom where posters recount events as if they actually happened to them. In turn commenters also play along from inside the narrative; when faced with being haunted by hallucinatory flies, a user offering the suggestions to "see if pesticide kills them" (Reddit 2023a) instead of challenging the unbelievable aspects of the story as would be expected elsewhere online. This mode of the authentically paranormal, and the *as-if* mode of interaction it elicits

also fascinates the testing out and inhabiting of new fictitious subjectivities which with to share and experience digital horror narratives through the faceless anonymity made possible through online storytelling spaces, the full effects of which will be discussed later. By borrowing from the language of authenticity and the ultimately unknowable answer of who's really behind the keyboard, creepypasta further tests the boundaries of online belief, producing myths from the grey area produced when anomalous fictions become entangled in everyday life online.

In a sense, this might be creepypasta's most anomalous potential, as they enact that "phenomenon of bordering" (Deleuze and Guattari [1988] 2013, 286) the real and the unreal. Whether these myths act to reveal something of the nature of fiction online or simply contribute to internet's proclivity for collective consensual hallucinations is a complex question. However, just as with Fort's damned data, who and how these myths are handled is often the most important factor when determining their consequence. As such, it becomes time to address the most pronounced instance of creepypasta's contaminating of fiction with reality; within the discourse surrounding the 2014 stabbing of Payton Leutner, commonly referred to as the Slenderman stabbing.

The Anomalous as Transformation

In 2014 two twelve-year-olds, Morgan Geyser and Anissa Weier, lead their friend Payton Leutner, also twelve, into the woods in Waukesha, Wisconsin, before stabbing her 19 times (BBC News 2014). Luckily Leutner survived, managing to drag herself to safety and get help. Beyond the extreme violence of the case, however, the part which provoked the strongest reactions was Geyser and Weier's claims that the attack was motivated by a desire to "please" Slenderman and "earn a place as [his] servants" (Independent 2021). In a much-quoted statement, Waukesha Police Chief Russell Jack said that the stabbing evidenced that the internet is "full of dark and wicked things" (Newsweek 2014). UK publications like The Daily Mail directed more blame at the fictional entity, describing Geyser and Weier as "possessed by [Slenderman]" (Smith 2019), and in the following years The Sun would also try and link other violent cases to Slenderman in order to sell the story of "the creepy meme's bloody trail" (Lucas 2019). However, in their favouring of the case's lurid details, these reports overlooked the reality of the situation, which was that both Geyser and Weier suffered from serious mental health issues, with Geyser in particular believing she could also

communicate with Lord Voldemort from Harry Potter and eventually being diagnosed with a rare case of early on-set schizophrenia. The two were charged as adults, apparently due to the severity of the charges, but found "not guilty by mental disease or defect" (BBC News 2017) and sent to mental health facilities after being left without treatment for a distressingly long period of time.

From this story a twisted logic emerged that claimed that this overspilling of online mythology into real life violence represented Slenderman becoming real. Writing for Oprah in 2019, DeAnna Janes describes how Slenderman's "myth has penetrated digital stories, web videos, and now real life", perpetuating this narrative of something dark creeping out of the imaginary and into real life via the intoxicating powers of social media and their communities. This idea, that when an object which originates online starts to affect and interact with offline lived reality might equate to a becoming real of that object, poses a strange ontological question. This notion gains a particularly grim aspect in relation to the Waukesha case, as the site for that ontological transformation of the Slenderman mythos into material reality is the piercing of Leutner's flesh. Journalists like Janes likely make the claim in an effort to create sensational reading but her statement makes an unappealing insinuation when followed through. I would argue that this is not Slenderman piercing the veil and stepping out into reality, that this act of violence is not the site in which that anomalous transformation is located, but that it is to be found elsewhere in the collective fears produced by the media response to the case.

The reaction to the so called Slenderman stabbing continues in a long tradition of moral panics stemming from older generations or those outside a community looking in and misunderstanding a playful and often nourishing engagement with imaginary constructs as an inability to differentiate fact from fiction. The media response to the Slenderman stabbing picks up where the satanic panic around Dungeons and Dragons (DnD) in the 1980's left off, in which fictional occult spells found in the gameplay were conflated with the real thing by mostly Christian onlookers Asimos puts these issues into further historical relief, pointing towards the fear mongering responses to the rise of the Gothic novel, which saw critics like James Beattie claiming the new genre filled "the mind with extravagant thoughts and too often with criminal propensities" (Asimos 2020, 46). As Asimos retorts, "just as readers in the eighteenth-century were more than capable of dispelling fact from fiction, so, too, are the readers online and on [No Sleep] in particular" (47 Just as Marilyn

Manson (1999) (a similarly high-gothic easy target for moral scapegoating) was not to blame for Columbine, Slenderman and creepypasta should not be blamed for the attack of Payton Leutner, for Slenderman is only real as a symbol of fear in the minds of those swept up in the media's moral panic. The dark and wicked things alluded to by the Waukesha Police Chief evidence a misguided literalism compatible to those psychical researchers who built Fort's damned data into the field of anomalistics. The case of the Waukesha stabbing speaks more to the anomalous tale's capacity to transgress epistemological borders via the open access nature of international online, and the dangers which ensue when divergent worlds, attitudes and nuanced subjectivities collide, especially when exacerbated by a media incentive to produce lurid narratives and trade of panic. Within a media landscape where fake news vies to become political reality (as explored later), creepypasta shows what happens when strange stories travel without borders across the web, how they shed their context in the hands of the uninitiated and begin to run away with themselves to produce dizzying effects.

Regarding creepypasta as a contemporary networked mode of the anomalous tale has shown how this genre reflects the tensions which arise from seemingly unbelievable stories and beliefs finding new homes online, and how creepypasta utilises the mechanics of internet platforms to tell tales which traverse the boundaries between different URLs, contexts, and fact and fiction. Yet a still more anomalous quality also lies beneath the surface, one where these stories seem to not just depict or represent but in fact *enact* anomalous phenomena upon their audience and participants. Could it be that the very sharing and receiving of these tales acts as a mechanism for breaching and reforming borders through the telling of strange tales? That is to say, when they become not tales *of* the anomalous, but tales with anomalous qualities; when it is not a case of what is represented within the story, but the story itself as a narrative object with anomalous affects, which ensnares, infects and transforms its audience. In these instances, the anomalous tale might be likened to a form of social contagion. If tales of the anomalous acted like windows into other possible realities through the description of world-breaking phenomena, then the anomalous tale could be thought of as more like the doorway through which its tellers and listeners are pulled into other realities, or perhaps the sinkhole into which the whole building eventually falls and the contents of the earth erupts through and spills upwards, contaminating and remaking the world it breaks into. In the next

section, I will further explore how such a narrative might work as I move from creepypasta to the still stranger story of QAnon. In doing this I am reminded of Erik Davis' line describing the weird activities of the satirical religion the Church of the SubGenius; "it may start out as a game, but it ends up a whole world" (2019, 4).

The Anomalous Tale: QAnon, a brief overview

A series of inscrutable lines of numbers topped with the word Anonymous in bold green letters and a date, Sat 28 Oct 2017, run across the top of the screenshot. What feel like codes and cyphers for online customs unbeknownst to the laymen, the eight short lines of text spin a wild and explosive tale. Using hurried abbreviations, the post cryptically relays military protocols already in motion, an economy of language adding urgency and intrigue to its climactic predictions. US M's (US Marshalls perhaps?) instituting a NG (New Government?) amongst massive riots and cross border runs. Central to the alluded to military insurgency is the extraction of HRC, what I would later find out to be the initials of Hillary Rodham Clinton (Bellingcat 2021b).

With this knowledge, the post's excitable pulp spy novel tone reveals itself as the wish fulfilment through fictional form of Hillary Clinton's most fanciful haters. Yet for many, the post's veneer of secret insider knowledge transformed this online expression of dark fantasy into evidence of an all-encompassing international conspiracy and a secret world beyond our own.

The above describes the first canonical Q drop (date enclosed above), ground zero for QAnon, a conspiracy theory, but also as Brian Hughes points out, interpretable as a "psychotic delusion, digital subculture, pyramid scheme, populist politics, violent extremism, and perhaps even a religion unto itself" (Hughes 2022, 13). To these categories, I would also add dangerously infectious anomalous tale. As outlined by the Southern Poverty Law Centre, central to QAnon's narrative is the false claim that figures such as the Clintons, Bill Gates and George Soros make up a "cabal" of Satanic cannibalistic paedophiles who secretly rule the world. Key to its mythology is the figure of Q, supposedly a high-level government insider with "Q clearance" (a real level of security clearance) who leaks information pertaining to Donald Trump and his intelligence community affiliates' plans to defeat the cabal. These leaks take the form of cryptic messages providing clues and (incorrectly) signalling events about to take place like the one described above, known in the community as Q drops. Originally posted on the 4chan /pol/ board,

short for politically incorrect, where the term Anon is used to signify the anonymous poster (hence QAnon), followers of the conspiracy analyse these drops for clues and make predictions about "The Storm"; the moment which Trump unmasks the cabal and brings them to justice, Democrats and political opponents are locked up, and a new economic system is installed leading to global prosperity (Southern Poverty 2020).

Whilst QAnon in its original form might now be culturally past its peak with its central prediction of Trump ousting the cabal failing to materialise by his 2020 election defeat, as study after study finds[4] it is far from dead, having changed the goal posts and started to tell new stories. "[Its] terrifying", Ipsos poller Chris Jackson notes of statistics pointing to the fact that nearly forty percent of American's either still believe or are undecided about core QAnon beliefs (Rose 2020). QAnon is also one of the first conspiracy theories to become quite so entangled in mainstream platforms like Facebook, changing (although slowly and arguable too late[5]) how Facebook dealt with such content[6] on its platforms. Judging by how, according to the Anti Deformation League as of May 2023, QAnon is "resurgent" on X (Anti Deformation, n.d.), formerly known as Twitter, following Elon Musk's takeover and loosening of community guidelines and regulations, it likely will not be the last time such anomalous tales find mass audiences on these platforms. Despite its continued appeal, QAnon's power as a political force is hard to quantify, especially after the January 6th US Capital building attack demonstrated that willingness to act hardly transmutes to affective action within these circles. Furthermore, one could take the view, following historian Richard Hofstadter's famous contention, that QAnon represents merely the latest expression of the "paranoid style" (Hofstadter 1964) of American politics, stretching back through McCarthyism and to the western establishment's disbelief in the organic instigation of the French Revolution. As stated though, these extreme beliefs seem to be becoming more and more widespread, both in the US and across the west (Lawrence 2020). Just as researcher Hugh Davies claimed in response to January 6th, I feel this necessitates "the need to interrogate QAnon and its appeal from multiple perspectives" (2022, 75), just as Fort recognised the importance of staying with the anomalous one hundred years previously.

The following attempts to understand QAnon through the methodological lens of the anomalous as it relates to stories, aided by my earlier discussion of creepypasta. Like with creepypasta, there are other lenses, theories and points of comparison which could have

been used to approach QAnon as a collectively told online story. For example, Pepe the Frog, an insider internet joke cartoon which became an alt right hate symbol, offers an analogous case study to QAnon's own unexpected transformation and semiotic shifts as it migrated across platforms and audiences. Theories such as Colin Campbell's idea of the cultic milieu could be used to explain the cultural narrative foundations of conspiracies like QAnon can be said to emerge from, and the perspective of QAnon as an internet born moral panic (touched upon later), best theorised by Stanley Cohen in *Folk Devils and Moral Panics,* could also add clarity to discussing the conspiracy in terms of a collective myth making. In comparing and contrasting QAnon with creepypasta, however, I want to emphasise the fundamentally strange and often horrific nature of QAnon's central mythology, its reliance on and exploitation of the mechanics and nuances of social media platforms and communities, and how these two factors come together to allow fringe internet ideas to take a hold within the mainstream. As well as this, despite their similarities and concomitant development, within academia Ondrak and Balanzategui seem to be the few who have recognised the overlap between creepypasta and QAnon, and that "the exact same mechanics … in which people engage with fictions [online are being used] to get people to believe far more malicious things" (Ondrak 2021, 10:10). By dint of QAnon's anomalous central narrative of the secret satanic cabal, holding such beliefs should also be an anomalous position akin to believing in the existence of Slenderman or Smile Dog, and yet these are not anomalous ideas anymore. In response to this I will look at why QAnon is such an effectively infectious anomalous tale.

Q Drops and Crowd Sourced Conspiracy

QAnon's central story telling device, the Q drop, invites a highly participatory mode of engagement utilising 4chan's anonymous imageboard format, something Heidi Beirich, co-founder of the Global Project Against Hate and Extremism, suggests might be key to its "mysterious attraction" (Beirich 2022) above other such conspiracy theories. Within largely unmoderated spaces such as 4chan's /pol/ board, a new economy of wild speculation governed by the rules of driving engagement can ferment away from the prying eyes of "normies" (those outside the community), fact-checkers or traditional arbiters of objectivity, creating the perfect virtual space for new lurid mysteries to excite the imaginations of its community. As such, the Q drop perfectly leverages this freedom from scrutiny to

produce allure and intrigue, as seen in the cryptic open-to-interpretation nature of drops like the one in figure 1; as the post invites its emerging followers to interpret, hypothesise, tell and retell speculative stories, filling in the gaps of the grand narrative of the coming storm as they collectively predict and surmise Q's activities. We see the response this type of post aims to elicit in posts like the one in

Figure 1. Q drop posted to 4chan on 10 November 2017. Screenshotted by author from: https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/148777785/#q148779656

Figure 2. A response comment to the above Q drop. Screenshotted by author from: https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/148777785/#q148782001.

figure 2, where another 4chan user begins the work of decoding Q's secretive message, quickly moving from interpretation to action, suggesting they make the information more accessible "so a normie can read it". The slogan of "do your own research" has been common in conspiratorial circles since the 90's (Ballantynea et al. 2022), however QAnon makes this active search for truth a central tenant in a way uniquely afforded to it by its participatory networked nature, through the act understood in the Q-sphere as "[following] the white rabbit", an allusion to *Alice in Wonderland* likely via *The Matrix* (Kelly 2021). Through the always connected nature of this online conspiracy, QAnon's following the white rabbit manifests as a sprawling intertextual search through the internet which might begin with theorises from niche corners of 4chan but quickly spreads outwards to other platforms and types of internet site as followers are encouraged to inspect real news sources for evidence of the fictional conspiracy. These supposed discoveries are then collected, discussed and corroborated within a tight ecosystem of Q related Facebook groups, YouTube influencers, and on occasion by mainstream news outlets too. Just as creepypasta hijacked everyday platforms to tell its stories, so too do everyday stories online become read as evidence in this anomalous conspiratorial narrative as QAnon makes the internet its narrative playing field. Through this intermeshing of territories, QAnon precipitates a downward spiral away from reality through contact with its anomalous narrative, as the further one follows the white rabbit the more one transforms their online existence, leading only further down the digital rabbit

hole, and eventually transforming their offline existence too as the conspiracy seeps outwards beyond the screen.

Like with creepypasta, QAnon's open-source storytelling is also key to how it sustains the cacophony of insidious old and new anomalous narratives found within its origins and orbit. QAnon has its origins in Pizzagate, an internet conspiracy theory which emerged from the now banned r/The_Donald subreddit (Reddit 2023c) concerning a child sexual abuse ring operating out of a Washington DC area pizza restaurant, supposedly revealed through coded messages in the leaked emails of Hillary Clinton's presidential campaign manager John Pedesta. Whilst Pizzagate built upon internet conspiracies like the "Clinton Body Count" (Vox 2019) and earlier antisemitic traits like "nocturnal ritual fantasy" (Lavin 2020) highlighted by researchers like Tal Lavin, QAnon's open-source structure further adds to this base narrative and supplements it with whatever fringe internet ideas and reactionary social media-derived paranoias best ensnare and drive engagement. Through not being derived from a central storyteller but instead through the collective interpretation and theorisation inspired by the Q drops, adherents can follow different wild theories and stories without them disrupting or disproving one another; from the belief that JFK junior is waiting to return from the dead to run with Trump in 2024 (Magloire 2021), to the existence of a fictional elixir called adrenochrome sourced from the blood of children lifted directly from the fiction of Hunter S Thompson. What this means is that when the Q drops eventually dried up in November 2020, the movement did not stop, as by this point it had become a self-generating user lead process of right wing myth-making disguised as investigative reporting unfolding across an ecosystem of Facebook groups, popular YouTuber accounts and Reddit pages. Bellingcat refers to this as a "crowd sourced conspiracy" (Bellingcat 2021b), just as creepypasta nearly a decade beforehand would become referred to as crowdsourced myth making. From this process, QAnon emerges as a syncretic assemblage of the most insidious and often strangest narratives of western and internet culture, a grouping of narratives of highly anomalous phenomena and claims produced through the pluralistic nature of online platforms and the process of collectively authored narrative refinement they facilitate.

QAnon as ARG

Not only does QAnon's participatory aspect produce a dizzyingly complex and, for its adherents, compelling narrative, but also as

Beirich says, it functions to entice followers into the fold "like a game" (Beirich 2022). Just as *Marble Hornets* used an ARG structure, so too does QAnon's participatory transmedia search for the truth function via the same mechanics used by alternative reality game developers like Reed Berkowitz. As Berkowitz points out, through "clever rabbit holes found in the real world that start them searching for answers", QAnon follows the playbook of an ARG, where Q's posts lead followers "through labyrinth-like stories full of puzzles, clues and group challenges" (Berkowitz 2021). Hugh Davies views this process as the "gamification" of conspiracy, as it transforms real life events into the "affective register of games, thereby rendering it more appealing to a user, inspiring engagement" (Davies 2022, 62), with the end goal being radicalisation.

Whilst this speaks to the blurring of fact and fiction online as discussed earlier, I believe understanding QAnon in terms of a game mechanics also elucidates the malignant transformative affects it has upon its adherents lives. To think of QAnon as a game is to think its followers as involved in play. As Johan Huizinga states in *Homo Ludens*, play is a "stepping out of 'real' life into a temporary sphere of activity with a disposition all of its own" (Huizinga [1949] 2016, 8). Is it still play if the player never returns from that sphere; if it is not temporary, or if one is unaware of the "only [pretend]" (8) nature of the game? Huizinga would say this is no longer play, however I believe this understanding of what happens in the act of play helps illuminate the changes QAnon's narrative affects upon on the lives of its followers, as they step out of their ordinary life into a sphere of cannibalistic paedophile elites, and in crossing that border of radicalisation, have to remake their lives to accommodate this anomalous narrative, and begin retelling the other stories which structure their everyday lives. I believe QAnon's gamified structure represents an important aspect of its anomalous capacity, not just for its addictive participatory nature but for how its unbridled and totalising play element facilitates a transformation beyond the "forces of the ordinary world" (Barton 2012, 2) upon the lives of the QAnon follower. As Berkowitz describes, when one plays the game and starts to follow the white rabbit, it leads only along "a breadcrumb trail away from reality" (Berkowitz 2021).

One way to measure the reality wrenching consequences of QAnon's gamified process of radicalisation might be in terms of the human cost, best collected anecdotally in subreddits like QAnon Casualties (r/ QAnonCasualties), in which family members share stories of loved ones who have fallen down the Q rabbit hole. We

find instances of Q followers world's becoming utterly incongruous with the lives of their loved ones; "I hate the world that ripped her from me, I miss my mom" (Reddit 2023b) being a common sentiment across the message board. Whilst boards such as these evidence the anomalous effects of this play, of the Q narrative's capacity to infect and remake the border between realities, there is however an important contingent who do seem to understand the game being played, one motivated by that other essential aspect of play Huizinga's book outlines; that of the fun of it.

QAnon as LARP

QAnon might just be the most successful example of a form of storytelling native to online chan culture known as LARPing (live action role playing). Bellingcat describes how even before the supposedly original 28th October 2017 Q drop, people known online as LARPers were already posting pretending to be "a well-placed source with confidential information about current events", under names like "FBI Anon, High Level Insider, Mega Anon" (Bellingcat 2021b). In fact, Q's claims draw upon narratives "directly descended from those made by other popular LARPers", with Q's Storm being comparable to "The Event" of a LARPer known as Victory of the Light, evidencing how these elements were already present and being told and retold within the community at the time of the first Q drop. We even see Q trying to find their voice, in a series of earlier non-canonical posts many now ascribe to Q, described by Bellingcat as the "lost drops" (Bellingcat 2021a). With this in mind, Q can be viewed simply as the most successful example of a type of creative writing exercise engaged in on 4chan, retelling narratives already present within the collective 4chan imagination. Just as with No Sleep, the community understood the fictional nature of these posts, as seen in figure 3. where a

Figure 3. A Commented bemoans the first Q drop on 4chan. Screenshotted by author from: https://archive.4plebs.org/pol/thread/146981635/#q147006341.

commenter on the original Q drop bemoans going along with another LARP, with the gif's title the "dance of the LARPer"[7] evidencing the ridiculousness with which some on 4chan view LARPing. Just as Slenderman emerged as the most successful spooky story from the creepypasta ecosystem, QAnon emerged as the one which seemed to strike the right chord with the /pol/ board.

Whilst acknowledging Q's origins within an insider storytelling practice dampens and dispels some of the phenomenon's seemingly mysterious origins, more importantly it leads to the same pathway by which Slenderman completed his anomalous transformation into reality, that transition from fiction into reality through the imaginations of neophytes. NBC News provides a detailed account of how right wing "internet agitators" like Paul Furber and Tracey Diaz "plucked out of obscurity" (Collins and Zadrozny 2018) Q's October 28th post and began promoting it on more mainstream channels like YouTube and Reddit in an attempt to make QAnon real within the minds of a certain demographic. Furber and Diaz recognised early on the effectiveness the Q LARP could become as a tool of radicalisation, seeking to profit from positioning themselves as authorities within the community which would arise from it. It is in this intentional migration from 4chan and those aquatinted with the platform's customs and behaviours, and towards the mainstream internet that the QAnon LARP's status as creative writing is shed and instead becomes a form of intentionally perpetrated hoax or grift upon a new unsuspecting demographic. As such, the normie adoption of the QAnon narrative at face value is the moment when the conspiracy blows up, for as described by Davies, Pizzagate and the QAnon LARP it birthed would have remained a joke "had it not escaped its 4chan context to be swallowed whole as truth by many in the mainstream" (2022, 71). Having supposedly seen behind the veil, it is in the hands of this new audience that QAnon's narrative begins to be experienced and told as genuine, cuts through and remakes the boundaries of its own mythology and ontology, making an increasingly broad online and offline sphere its new playing field as it does so.

As Davies points out, attending to the ludic or narrative aspects of QAnon should not overshadow the fact that QAnon was born out of a "broader backdrop of disenchantment" and "shaped by multiple competing and opportunistic forces" (2022, 75). In arguing for the effectiveness with which QAnon tells its transmedia story, I do not mean to propose it as the sole or most significant factor within QAnon's rise, but simply to highlight the role and reach of the online anomalous tales as a reality shaping force. It should be noted that *The Protocols of the Elders of Zion*, the false document which became the urtext for modern antisemitic conspiracy, emerged from very similar hoax origins and with equivalently wild claims. Perhaps this discussion best serves to highlight how western society is still susceptible to malignant tales which transform the worlds of those

sucked into their orbits, and despite its promise of free access to information, anomalous beliefs also only become more commonplace as they adopt new strategies and subjectivities as they extend their reach through the internet.

Conclusion: Animism, Hype and The Anomalous Tale

In connecting QAnon to creepypasta and a history of anomalous narratives, I hope to have elucidated some of the qualities these stories gain as they emerge online and find new powers in their inherently interconnectedness. Creepypasta and QAnon can be viewed as accelerating and complicating the social aspects of their storytelling through the affordances of the platforms they emerge on, capable of producing new collaborative formulations but also of stoking and spreading fear, reactionary desires and misinformation without constraint. Through their networked nature, they trouble the borders between fact and fiction like older legends, and are able to speak back to the tensions inherent in how we constitute facts and beliefs in the age of the internet. However, through these same processes anomalous tales find new ways to become virulently infectious, helping them shed both context and rational norms to dangerous ends. Importantly, anomalous online narratives are not just told and received, but participated in and played with, affecting the lives and loved ones of those who partake in the communities surrounding these tales. I would like to conclude, however, by considering one way these processes speak to a broader point of relevance concerning both the effects of legend-like stories in contemporary society and how we live with the internet in general, and how the events described throughout might not be outlier phenomenons but actually to be expected and inextricable from the workings of the internet.

The twinned narratives of Slenderman and QAnon's transition from online fantasy to offline realities demonstrates how online platforms extend the complex process of co-creation between story and storytellers seen throughout history's myths and legends into new digital realms. However, in this new networked environment, the anomalous tale can also produce other transformative effects upon the lives of both the story and those who share and receive it. Writing in his 1999 PhD thesis, Mark Fisher uses the term hyperfiction to describe a similar process in which a text does not just represent but is "directly effective upon its reader/ consumer" (Fisher [1999] 2018, 174). As publisher Exmilitary describe in their forward, Fisher's writing draws "contagious and memetic

inspiration" (forward, i) from the prevailing Y2K hysteria of its time, a context which accounts for the text's cyber positive interest in theory fiction hybrids, a tone which feels distinctly different to the present discussion of fact and fantasy blurring online, well before the internet was mainstream and the real advent of the notion of post truth politics. Fisher discusses hyperfiction as those stories which produce a "feedback [loop] between fiction and the real" (174), using the example of Disney's *Toy Story*, a film whose fiction he says becomes real in the form of the toys also existing in real life, the film serving as an advert for its own representations, one again engaged in through play. Central to Fisher's theorising and what makes it insightful in the present discussion, however, is how he centres the question of agency in a way reminiscent of the modes of production of both creepypasta and QAnon discussed above. Hyperfiction assumes "no special role for the author (or indeed for the text)" (174), just as creepypasta and QAnon's collective open-source storytelling process "inevitably [destabilises]" the influence and authority of their originators. Fisher goes on to liken this "escape of agency from the subject" to animism, due to how the previously inert fiction *itself* gains an agency and so "an ability to intervene into the Real" (174), as if taking on a life of its own.

If the toys of *Toy Story* gain an agency through becoming purchasable and playable goods, materialising the very objects of their fictional representation, I believe a similar process happens with the anomalous tale through the hype operations of hyperfiction. As Fisher says, "hype transforms (desired) end- products into potentials" (175). As the fictional fears and worlds of creepypasta and QAnon reach a critical mass of virality (or hype), they inspire real fears and collective delusions, the fictional "map precedes the territory" (175) it creates as Fisher describes in Baudrillardian terms, and through this process the anomalous tale gains an animistic like agency and ability to intervene into reality, flowing from online fantasy into offline action. Through its networked collective adoption, the anomalous tales begins to move as if by its own accord, governed by the collective will and a host of other "competing and opportunistic forces" (Davies 2022, 71) in negotiation with the ever-evolving concerns and content of the story. From this perspective the anomalous tale can be seen as something not unlike Egregores or Tulpas within western esotericism, autonomous entities or "thought forms" (Stavish 2018) formed out of collective participation in their strange storytelling, propagating and extending their life as it informs and infects the minds of new participants, pulling new

audiences in the direction of its rabbit hole and away from reality. Under this logic, the telling of anomalous tales becomes a dangerous game, playing with animistic narratives which haunt the fringes waiting for opportunities to be transformed to meets the needs of the present moment, and in their strange exchange transform its audience in return.

Notes

[1] The term the anomalous also escapes the cultural baggage of other applicable terms such as the weird, with its more unfortunate gloopy Lovecraftian trappings. The weird seems to be undergoing its own cultural revival at the moment with its own equally interesting but separate associations and insights, best explored in podcasts like *Weird Studies* and through cultural expressions like *Weird Walk*. For an up to date contextual study of this term, see Erik Davis' *High Weirdness, Drugs, Esoterica, and Visionary Experience in the Seventies.* (Davis 2019, 1-53).

[2] Unusually but perhaps not inappropriately The Anomalous is also the name of a British grey moth, a creature of the night found congregated around glowing lights (UK Moths n.d.)

[3] For a comprehensive study of the history and significance of these phenomenons, Shira Chess and Eric Newsom's Folklore, Horror Stories and the Slender Man and Vivian Asimos's Digital Mythology and the Internet's Monster offer detailed accounts of creepypasta's preeminent monster. Similarly Mike Rothschild provides exhaustive detail of the developments of the QAnon story in The Storm is Upon Us, whilst Jake Hanrahan's Q Clearance podcast approaches the story from the perspective of conflict reporting to outline its most significant actors as it continues to develop.

[4] Reported in February 2023, Professor of Intelligence and National Security Robert Dover claims "an estimated 22% of Americans accept one of [QAnon]'s core beliefs: that some kind of political "storm" is coming and that violence could be necessary to achieve it" (Dover 2022).

[5] As the *Guardian* reports, "facebook's own research showed that algorithmic recommendations of groups may have contributed to the rise of violence and extremism… internal documents showed executives were aware of risks posed by groups and were warned repeatedly by researchers to address them" (Paul 2021).

[6] As Facebook state: "We continue to strengthen our enforcement by identifying additional militarized social movements and new terms associated with QAnon. We'll continue consulting experts to inform our strategy and will identify and remove content accordingly" (Meta 2022).

[7] As an aside, the gif itself depicts the serial killer Buffalo Bill from *The Silence of the Lambs* (1991), the poster therefore describing this already problematic presentation of gender performances as a LARP, a predictably offensive implication for Anon culture. This detail aside however, the strangely poetic phrase the "dance of the LARPer" taps into the frivolous escape of agency described in Q's anomalous transformation later on.

QAnon's strange turn of events as a whole could be named the dance of the LARPer (figure 3).

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